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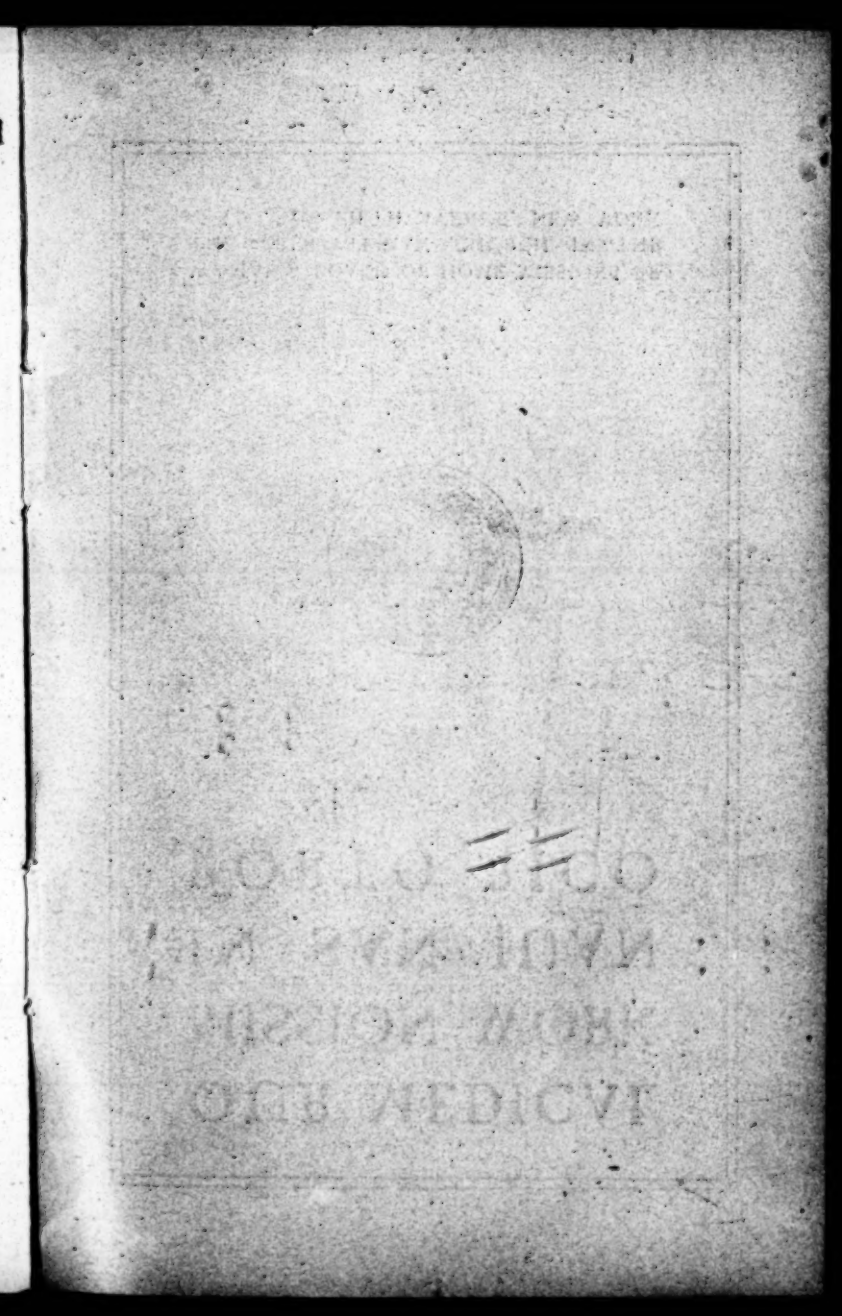
OUR MEDICAL MISSION WORK IN SAN JUAN PORTO RICO

WOMAN'S BOARD OF HOME MISSIONS OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE U. S. A., 156 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK



OUR MEDICAL MISSION WORK IN SAN JUAN, PORTO RICO.

Dr. Grace Williams Atkins, our missionary in Porto Rico, began work at San Juan January, 1901.

One who has known her long and been associated with her as teacher and friend writes:

"Very early in life she showed a deep interest in religious things, and while yet under fifteen years of age determined to go as a missionary. From the time she made this decision she never wavered, but planned her whole life with this purpose in view and thoroughly prepared herself for her work.

"After the first year her medical course was interrupted and she entered a hospital to take practical training in nursing. Later she continued her studies and graduated in 1898. Her training has been very thorough, and, combining it with a steady nerve and sanctified common sense, she seems to be thoroughly prepared for her mission.

"As a teacher she has had good preparation. When only fifteen years of age she was selected to teach a class of boys in Sabbath School, because the superintendent said he 'wanted the best.'

PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
425 LOMBARD STREET
PHILADELPHIA, PA. 19147

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"She is a young woman of strong character, strong principles and decided opinions. She is a strong arm for the weak and tempted to lean upon, and there is a sense of restfulness in her presence which is very good for tired nerves."

The work of the medical missionary at San Juan might be classified under three heads—that of doctor, teacher and missionary. Each morning at half-past seven she starts out in her phaeton or on horseback to make her rounds of calls upon very sick patients. Sometimes she goes into the city; again duty calls her among the groups of shacks that are dotted here and there close to the town. These last journeys are on horseback, as the narrow paths leading to these settlements will not permit a phaeton to enter, as they wind through fences, under low-bending trees and close up to the houses themselves many times. It might be interesting to follow the doctor on one of these morning excursions. Starting out of her driveway, she turns to the south on the military road. Just at the gate she meets a group of country folk coming in on ponyback. They are riding the straw saddle with its baskets on either side filled with fruit, cheese or eggs for the market. Across the saddle they have each laid a pillow, and its case with long ends of hand-made lace hangs down over the baskets. The bridles are of rope, tied around the ponies' noses, with ends left long for reins. When the riders wish to go faster they wave their arms in the air and the ponies gallop along with the lower extremities of their riders bobbing up and down at the side of the ponies' heads. These people have been to the office before, and know that the doctor will return for the nine o'clock office hour, so they exchange the morning salutation, "Buenos

dias" ("Good-day"), with her and pass on into the yard to await her return. The doctor canters up the hill and then turns off to the left toward the sea, following a sandy road to the shack settlement. To her right is the Presbyterian church, the first Protestant church to be built after the American occupation and the second one to be built upon the island of Porto Rico. It is very artistic, with its red walls and dark green blinds, as it stands out against a background of waving palm trees and the blue expanse of ocean stretching far off to the north and east. It is very comfortable, too, with its six double doors on each side and three in front. These are closed in the early morning, and although we cannot see inside, as we might like to do, there is another interesting sight outside that we must notice in passing. At the water faucet in the side yard stands the sexton of the church dealing out water to the procession of women and children who have come with empty five-gallon kerosene cans perched upon their heads. Their cans filled, they replace them to the tops of their heads and trudge off through the deep sand to their wash tubs, happy enough to know that each morning for one hour there is water for them which does not need to be hunted or begged or bought—thankful that the church brings that help to the daily burdens.

Past the church the road narrows down to a path, and this the doctor follows. On each side, here and there, without any regularity, are the shacks. Each one faces as its owner fancies. This first one to the right and that one to the left farther down are built of boards, and have zinc roofs. They are painted, and have piazzas running across their fronts without steps to

them. This little house to the left and several others dotted in here and there are made of palm branches laid across horizontal poles. They are hardly large enough to allow one to stand upright inside. In this one to the left the floor is of deep sand, piled high. There is an open door at each end, and, looking through, we see a partition of rags dividing the house into two rooms. It isn't very difficult to peek through this partition, and in the two rooms we can see a table, a box which serves as a seat, and a cot or two for beds. At the front door a woman is sitting before a little iron charcoal stove, waiting for the tin tomato can of coffee to boil. At her side are three boys and girls playing in the sand. No trouble to keep their clothes clean, for they are clad in birthday dress only. When the coffee is ready they will be given a piece of bread to break up in it, and that will be their breakfast. This is a poor home, so probably it will be clear coffee with bread. Across the street in the balcony house the children had boiled milk and sugar for their coffee.

Further on there are more shacks—some well built, like the first; some very poor, like the second; and many intermediate grades. Some have board walls made from old packing boxes which have been begged or bought, and thatched roofs; some have thatched walls as well as thatched roofs. Some are set up upon posts, while others have sand floors. All have a door in front for light and air, and a large majority have no step to that door. When the house is on posts three feet or more from the ground the absence of front steps is rather inconvenient.

The doctor rides up to the door of a house

and inquires about a sick woman. The patient is not doing well, and a man carries out a box for the doctor to jump down upon, and holds her horse while she dismounts. Then the box is shifted to the door and becomes the doorstep. She passes through the living room to the patient's bedroom. It is very dark, for windows are not considered proper for sleeping rooms, and so were omitted when the house was built, and the doctor must have a candle in order to see her patient. Across the side of the room hangs a curtain, behind which is the patient's bed. It is of thatch like the roof of the house, very hard and uncomfortable—even more so than the beds of uneven boards laid across horizontal poles that one sometimes sees. The patient has her clothes on to keep her warm, while over her is spread a sheet. The examinations are made, medicines given, and the doctor mounts her horse and rides on, first dodging the piece of barb wire that has been stretched across the path for a clothesline, and is now laden with a fluttering assortment of clothes. Barb wire makes a convenient clothesline, as clothes pins aren't necessary. However, it isn't always used, and if you look down to the right you see a sight that is spooky enough at a distance at twilight, for it looks like a group of fat ghosts, but upon closer examination proves to be dresses buttoned around bushes to dry. Just in the shade of these bushes are the probable owners, busy enough rubbing away at their tubs. They are squatting upon the ground, rubbing strong yellow soap upon the clothes, which will take out the color as well as the dirt, and wrapping them into bundles to soak, while they rub other pieces over the big flat stone that serves as washboard. They call to

the doctor as she passes. One woman says she is going to her office in the afternoon, and another invites the doctor to see a sick child in a neighbor's house. It is not always possible to accept such invitations, for the time has been passing quickly and there are other calls to be made. In front of this house stands Condelario, and the doctor must inquire about his sister as she passes. Two weeks before she underwent an operation, and is now almost well. It isn't necessary to visit her, and with a few words of encouragement the doctor passes on.

The next visit is made on Paco's sister. Paco is an old patient, who had an abscess on his jaw and went to the office to have it opened. It was a large one, and so it was necessary to give a little chloroform. The doctor was alone at the time, and although Paco was a strapping big boy she managed to keep his arms and legs quiet by wrapping a sheet tightly around both Paco and the table. Since that time Paco has been a warm friend of the doctor, and now wants her to treat his sister, who has the fever. This sister is lying on her canvas cot, with her head tied up tightly in a handkerchief to keep out the air, as is the custom of the country. The mother is told about the medicine and how she is to prepare the food, and the visit is over. The next patient is a little baby that was very sick a few days before, but with change of food and a little medicine has grown much better. The mother's smiling face tells the story before any questions are asked. So the morning hour passes, and it is soon time for the doctor to hurry back if she is to be in time for the morning office hours. The office is filled with patients, each holding a tract and number, as the doctor comes out of her office, Bible in

hand, ready for morning prayers. The chapter is read and explained in Spanish, and the heads of the patients nod with approval as they listen for perhaps the first time to the reading of God's word. Then all are invited to buy a portion of the Scriptures and come to the church services, after which the medical work continues. And, one after the other, the patients pass in and out of the office, while all manner of ills are treated. Some patients are well-to-do and gladly pay the regular physician's fee, while others are poor and must be given the medicine, and sometimes food and clothes as well. At times a patient is put to bed in the neighboring room and nursed until she is well enough to go to her home.

Many of the poor ones are surprised and delighted with the American methods of examination, and sometimes they quite demand that their hearts or lungs be examined, although they are quite loath to believe that the wind they were sure was in their heart was only a little indigestion. Small surgical operations are done, as you can see by the bandaged hands or feet. Many suffer from boils and abscesses sometimes for weeks before they can muster sufficient courage to go to the doctor for them. Besides these patients, there are some who have come for more serious trouble, but must be sent home again until the hospital is ready for them, as they cannot get well without an operation and good nursing following it.

It is quite interesting to listen to the questions that the doctor is asked after the patient has received his medicine. "Can he wet his hands while taking the medicine?" "Can he breathe the night air?" "Is the medicine to be taken in sugar water, salt water or plain

water?" And, at last, "How much is the medicine?"—for all are expected to pay for what they receive according to their ability; and just so far as possible the work is self-supporting, that the people may learn to help themselves, and also that no greater burden may be laid upon the home churches.

In this way between thirty and forty patients are treated every day except Sundays. The Sabbath day is made as much a day of rest as possible, and both doctor and patients are to be found at the church services. Sixty boys and girls wait each Sunday morning for the lesson that the doctor tries to teach them. They are so much interested in the story, with its blackboard illustrations and other pictures! And when review Sunday comes one and another can repeat the lesson stories with their golden texts until all have been told.

This is the work of the medical missionary as it was done before Dr. Atkins returned to the States in May. When she went back to San Juan Dr. Jane Harris accompanied her, and together they will be able to aid a larger number and help them more than one could working alone.

Dr. Harris was a student at Bryn Mawr, and later studied medicine in the Woman's Medical College of the New York Infirmary. After graduation she held the appointment of assistant to the out-practice of the infirmary, where the work consisted of calls upon the tenement-house patients of the East Side and medical treatment to those who were unable to afford a doctor.

She next went to Flatbush, N. Y., to settle in private practice, and while there was called to Santa Clara, in the Adirondacks, to take charge

of a sanitarium under the Working Girls' Vacation Society. After the house closed for the winter she returned to her practice in Flatbush, where she remained until our Board asked her to assist Dr. Atkins in Porto Rico.

It is their wish to help just as many as possible of the unfortunate ones who would not otherwise receive medical aid, either because of their poverty or the distance of their homes from the larger towns. At the same time, they are endeavoring to win the friendship of as many as possible of the more favored ones, and so draw them into the church services. The work on the hospital will be pushed as soon as a suitable site for the building can be obtained. It will be built of wood, and as cheaply as will be consistent with strength for good service. With the hospital building many will be helped who could not receive help elsewhere, and it is hoped that many souls will be won for the Master through the healing that comes from the hospital work, not only among the native Porto Ricans, but also among our own American people, who have forgotten that God is near by even in a strange land.

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